

PRAISE-POETRY AND STREET-PUBLICATIONS IN TAMIL<sup>1</sup>

Praise-poetry has a long tradition in Tamil, and the purpose of this paper is to show that the somewhat ephemeral matter here discussed lies well within such a tradition.

In *Caṅkam* poetry, dating from around the beginning of the Christian era, *Ārruppatai* is the typical form whereby a poet commends to a colleague his patron; the resulting poem is the commendation. Instances of these are found in *Eṭṭuttokai*, the *Eight anthologies*. In *Puranānūru*, certain colophons tell us that the accompanying poems are *ārruppatai*, but many others are such in effect; to them all the Sanskrit term *Prasasti* may be given. An instance is *Puram*. v. 88. The following is Professor Zvelebil's translation<sup>2</sup>:

Whoever you may be,  
beware  
before you even see  
our lord  
the chief of warriors  
terrible and strong  
with their long shining spears.  
His shoulders are like drums  
beating the sound of battles and of feasts  
and on his mighty well-formed chest  
fine jewels glow and shine.  
Beware  
before you say:  
the van and the tail  
all  
let's go and fight!

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1. This paper represents the substance of a lecture given within the Istituto di Indologia dell'Università di Torino on April 23, 1976. I take this opportunity of expressing my deepest gratitude to professor Oscar Botto and his colleagues for their kind invitation and warm hospitality.

2. KAMIL ZVELEBIL, *The smile of Murugan*, pp. 80-81.

Slightly later, but still well within the ambitus of classical literature, we have the *ārṛuppaṭai* included in the *Ten Songs*, *Pattuppaṭṭu*, such as *Perumpāṇārṛuppaṭai* and *Cirupāṇārṛuppaṭai*. The direct nature of these poems is lost somewhat in view of their long and descriptive nature: in *Paṭṭiṇappālai*, for instance, the direct address is confined to 3 or 4 lines out of a total of 301 lines.

Viewed in this light, one could include in *praśasti* virtually all the discontinuous praise-poetry to God that makes up so great a proportion of the *Bhakti-literature* of early and medieval Tamil. I refer in particular to *Tēvāram* and *Nālāyirappirapantam*, which date approximately from the 6th. to the 9th. centuries A. D. Though it is true that much of this has, in recent years, come to feature in ritual, not only in South India but even in South-east Asia, it would seem that such was not originally its purpose. The poems are isolated bursts of praise, effusions that laud a Divine rather than mortal patron:

In his ears he has the palm-leaf roll;  
riding a steer, crowned with the pure white crescent-moon,  
besmeared with ashes of the jungle burning ground,  
he is the thief who stole away my soul.  
He wears a flower-garland, he who in former days  
when praised and worshipped, showered grace  
and came to famous Brahmapuram.  
He is our mighty Lord<sup>3</sup>!

Why consider examples of classical Tamil genres in a paper on ephemera? I believe it is possible that we have, almost by chance, the poems of *Puṛaṇāṇūru* and *Tēvāram*. It is hard to prove that they were ever meant to be preserved for posterity. They are neither chronicles nor inscriptions, nor are they sections of a remembered ritual, such as the *Ṛgveda*, with its tight conventions and memorization-techniques. Nor are they treatises forming part of a *sūtra-tradition*. Nor again do they depend upon epic sources, such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, or *Cilappatikāram*. It is true that there is some evidence of a common source linking parts of this last with the *patikams* that accompany *Paṭiṇruppaṭṭu* and which are an attempt to make a royal chronicle of that work. But the decades themselves exhibit no such purpose.

One would dare to venture that poems of this nature, whether religious or not, are « occasional » and not intended for posterity. There is, perhaps, little difference in the sentiments presented in the above-quoted examples and the following quite recent instance:

« O goddess of the long dark eyes! Mother, to you I eagerly turn!  
— since Lakṣmī, goddess of the earth, and Viṣṇu have from long ago  
daily returned to the heavens as they rule the earth.

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3. ZVELEBIL, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

O goddess of the large dark eyes! You are the Mother worthy of praise at the hands of all the gods, of the consort of Sarasvatī, who is immanent in learned texts, of Viṣṇu adorned with the jewel *kaustubha* who moves in the heavens, and of the bedecked earth-goddess and Lakṣmī ».

This is a translation of the first two verses of a *Patikam* in praise of Nilāyatākṣī, the Devī at Nākapattanam, by Ātreya Śrī Kṛṣṇa Śāstri, published at Tiruccirāppaḷli in 1919 by the author. In a note he tells us that his poem is in praise of the goddess of his birthplace; in other words he had a personal or sentimental reason for composing it. It includes, moreover, an exercise in poetic phonological adornment, *śabdālaṅkāra*: its verses avoid the use of plosive sounds, *vallinam*:

*vaṇṇaman navaṇāl nālum / vaṇamiyai ilaiyāl vāla*  
*viṇṇulām nilaviṇ mēlām / virimaṇi amarum māmāl*  
*uṇṇinai nūla lāvum / uraṇaruḷ vāṇi nēyaṇ*  
*viṇṇavar eṇṇum ammai / nīlamā vīḷiyi nāḷē<sup>4</sup>.*

This is an example of the more august variety of street-publication. Published as stated by the author, it has no doubt never been reissued. It is but one of the thousands of such pamphlets, usually of from 4 to 8 pages, that survive in the collections of the India Office Library (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), London<sup>5</sup>, and of the British Library, Department of Oriental Printed Books. It is indeed possible that these two institutions preserve more of such material than is to be found in any single place elsewhere; after all, the Tamil collections therein are but instances of all the major languages of India they hold. These collections of pamphlets are worthy of study for a number of reasons, and they cover a wide spectrum of interest ranging from praise of God to the extolling of a brand of snuff!

In the course of examining the collection at the India Office Library, I came across many boxes of such pamphlets hitherto uncatalogued. A number are missionary tracts, giving the Christian position of the time on such matters as idol-worship, Navarātri and other festivals, widow-remarriage, caste and the like. The whole would indeed be a treasure-house for a social historian of 19th. and early 20th. century Tamil Nadu.

Political histories of this area abound, indeed there is an embarrassing number of studies of the Justice Party and the D. M. K. Suffice be it that a considerable number of these pamphlets advance these causes, and there are others put out by cast-associations such as those of the Viśvabrāhmaṇas, the Vaṇṇiyakula Kṣatriyas and the Nāṭars. Many

4. Ātreya Śrī Kṛṣṇa Śāstri, *op. cit.*, v. 2.

5. I am greatly indebted to Miss Joan Lancaster, Director of the India Office Library and Records, for permission to make use of pamphlet material in Tamil held there.

sought to elevate in caste-rank the castes they discuss, descent from Viśvakarman being claimed for the Viśvabrāhmaṇas, for instance. There are also pamphlets that extol national heroes such as Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose.

I have already exemplified *praśasti* of the Divine. Further to be noted are a fascinating variety of illustrations of *Talapurāṇams*. These set out the local legends concerning the South Indian temples, and perhaps the best-known is *Tiruvilaiyāṭarpurāṇam*, by Parañcōti munivar. Composed in the 16th. century it relates to the shrine of Siva and Mīnākṣī at Maturai. There are also albums of pictures alone. Many of these are line-drawings that stylistically are related to the Tanjore school of icon-painting on wood that arose in the 17th century. This arose as a result of fusion between Nāyaka wall-painting and elements of Deccani miniature schools introduced to Tanjore by its Mahratta rulers. Some booklets contain *kōlam*-designs<sup>6</sup>.

At the outset the point was made that *praśasti* of the Divine and the secular is essentially of the same species. The poem in praise of Nīlāyatākṣī excerpted above is, then, hardly different from:

« The author of this Episode invokes the Almighty that the work undertaken by him to construct a resting-house or mutt for Sadhus and Mahatmas... may attain completion by kind condescension of King Emperor George V at Delhi Durbar Coronation as predicted by his step father, that the wants of his Majesty's subjects may be relieved, and that his Majesty may reach Home safe and sound.

The humble devotee ere this composed the coronation song in honour of the world-famed Emperor Edward VII, with the fervent hope that his undertaking to construct the rest House of Sadhus may approach completion.

Before the said coronation song could reach the kind perusal of the King Emperor alluded to, Edward VII breathed his last, having suffered from severe illness attributable to past Karma, while the humble Devotee looked up to him for support in his undertaking... »<sup>7</sup>.

From the India Office collection it is clear that a concerted effort was made throughout India to celebrate the Coronation Durbar of December 1911, when King George V and Queen Mary were presented in state in the new capital. We learn of parades and flag-raisings in Kumbakonam, Mayavaram and Tanjore, and of whole-holidays in schools and of special plays and concerts. However exotic the Delhi Durbar may

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6. *Kōlam* are ritual designs, usually in rice-flour or flour and water, made on the floor in a house whereon a ceremony is to be held, or on the ground in front of a house. These latter are particularly ornate during the penitential month of Mārkaṭi, Dec.-Jan., and then include pumpkin flowers embedded in small pats of cow-dung.

7. NĪLAKANTA SASTRI, S. M., *The Coronation ode*, Periyakulam, 1911, in « Tamil and English », v. 1 (English).

have been in the context of India's awakening national consciousness, it was probably no more so than the splendour of the Mughal Court. The panegyrics of 1911 were well within the Indian tradition. While remote, monarchy could be addressed, and the addresses accepted, in the same manner as Godhead.

But this was just another of the varieties of street-pamphlet. Many, again religious or secular, are humorous. One smiles at the rivalry between the two consorts of the god Subrahmaṇya, Vaḷḷi and Teyvayāṇai. For fairly obvious reasons, Vaḷḷi, the younger consort of the god acquired in the Tamil tradition is by far the most important, the Heavenly Army by contrast being a shadowy figure. So with Kṛṣṇa as between Rukmiṇī and Satyabhāmā. In Tamil poems termed *Ēcal*, each consort vies with the other in her love of and devotion to their mutual spouse. In very colloquial terms Vaḷḷi says to Teyvayāṇai:

« How dare you push yourself forward, you shrew, forgetting your position. I know how rich you are, evil one, and how you seek to trap Kantan. But it is me whom he clasps to his side with a kiss and he, the lord Kantan, has forgotten all about you! ».

The Heavenly Army replies in no more dignified terms in dialogue that recalls Greek comedy. The point of the exercise is the devotion to God that allows, indeed demands, all: thieving such as that of Tirumaṅkaikāy ālvār, chicanery such as that of Māṇikkavācakar in the matter of the purchase of horses and, in our tradition, the divine foolishness of St. Francis of Assisi.

To turn finally from the religious to the profane, many of these pamphlets are on social questions such as strikes or police firing. To one who admits to an interest in modes of transport, pamphlets on railways, car pilgrimages to Śrīraṅgam, and on the aeroplane, are fascinating study. One pamphlet, by Ka.Ve.Nārāyaṇacāmi Mutaliyār, published in 1919, concerns the controversy between the use of Broad Gauge (1 metre 60) and Metre Gauge in the South of India, both of which have termini at Madras<sup>11</sup>. It is entitled *Cinṇa reyilukkum periya reyilukkum caṇṭai*, « Quarrel between the little railway and the big railway ». As such, it is cast in the same mould as the divine wrangling between Vaḷḷi and Teyvayāṇai:

Little Rail: Sir! Big Rail(way), how are you?

Big Railway: What's this? Who are you to come and enquire after my health?

L R: Steady... Because you think you're so grand, that's no reason to think I'm insincere when I ask you how you are.

8. Out hunting, he meets Vaḷḷi crop-watching.

9. < Skt. *Devasenā*.

10. *Vaḷḷikkum Teyvayāṇaikkum ēcal*.

11. The former at Central, the latter at Egmore (< Ta. Eḷumpūr).

- B R: What business do we have together, that you should ask for me?
- L R: I just wonder why, though so big, you yet behave like a dog.
- B R: You're the emaciated toothless cur, yapping about gods and devils!
- L R: Ha! Is it I who am dried up?
- B R: Who can doubt it when, like yourself, your passengers are so feeble.
- L R: Rubbish! How am I feeble?
- B R: Worm! By that very question you recognize I'm right, a fact known already to everyone else.
- L R: What a pack of lies!
- B R: It is not!
- L R: Take care, if you do tell lies.
- B R: Who do you think you are, a buzzing bee talking about taking care! Shoo! mangy cur, clear off! If a cross-wind blows, you'll fall off the track, and then you'll look like someone who has lost all his teeth.
- L R: O.K., but what about those who would walk rather than put up with the roaring hell of dust that you kick up. I had forgotten you were like a donkey too, but I've just remembered it!

Perhaps the most amusing title of a dispute so far noticed is: *Kuṭu-mikkum kirāppukkum caṇṭai; moṭṭattalai mattiyastam*, « Quarrel between the *Kuṭumi* and the European-style haircut, with Bald Head as umpire ». This was perhaps of real concern in the early part of the century, when traditional dress was considered quaint among those who would get on in the « modern » world of administration and business.

Other pamphlets are purely descriptive. Wonder at the aeroplane is expressed in verse by P. M. K. Taṅkarāju Tēvar in: *Intira vimāṇam ēropḷēṇ pāṭṭu*, published in Citamparam in 1933:

- « See how, with pleasure, I take up the tale of the aeroplane, attend earnestly to my song! Straightway give grace to my Tamil verses, O thou of beautiful hands and wond'rous elephant-face!
- Boys: Look at the aeroplane, flying like the desirous dark cuckoo, droning away in the sky. How it draws one's eye, as would a lovely maiden. It resembles a sparrow or other small bird.
- Girls: You must tell us, in which city was this bee-like 'plane skilfully built. It is a wonder to us, whether it is bird or beast, as it drones.
- Boys: Beautiful maidens: in Australia, so far away, with skill do they build it, in the Vaṣṭaṇ King Co.<sup>12</sup>, O you who attract our eyes!
- Girls: Does the German 'plane which flies over our heads, bird or animal, take food or not? Do tell us.

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12. < Western King Co., perhaps.

Boys: It does not feed on vegetables or rice, girls. As it flies onward, roaring, it consumes petrol and water, O you who attract our eyes.

Girls: Now they seem like pigeons, like birds or like animals, as two people board this ship of cloud-colour that sails the skies ».

Notice the dialogue-device again employed, reflecting folk-songs such as the stick-dance, *Kōlāṭṭam*, or the swin-songs, *Ūñcal pāṭṭu*, sung at weddings. Observe too the ritual invocation to Gaṇapati at the beginning. A brand of snuff is extolled in a folk-song cycle by A. S. Catāci-vatās, *Acal Ṣaṇmukam Paṭṭaṇam poṭiyiṇ perumai*, published probably in 1926:

« Who is ignorant of Acal Ṣaṇmukam's Madras Snuff? Its reputation resounds to the limit of the eight cardinal points of the world! Extol to the limit of your ability its glory! ».

— and so on...

Whatever one's view of such material as literature may be, it is clear that a study of these pamphlets provides a fascinating insight into Tamil writing of the last 100 years. Such works have yet to earn their proper place in histories of Indian literature.